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SUBJECT: ELECTION-TIME ANGER, ANGST IN HUNGARIAN-MAJORITY  
REGIONS

Classified By: DCM JERI GUTHRIE-CORN FOR REASONS 1.4 (B) and (D)

Summary

1. (C) During a recent visit to ethnic Hungarian areas in Transylvania, UDMR leaders said they would join a new government no matter which party won the elections. However, they admitted the PD-L was not their first choice as a coalition partner due to conflicts over the issue of Hungarian autonomy in Transylvania. While confident that the UDMR will surpass the five percent threshold needed to enter Parliament, they worry about increasing polarization, apathy, and radicalization among Romania's ethnic Hungarians. Meanwhile, ethnic Romanian leaders--a distinct minority in Covasna and Harghita counties--are disappointed in the central government and distrustful of their Hungarian counterparts. Nevertheless, the ethnic Romanian electorate remains so politically divided that their candidates may not win in districts where they still comprise the majority. In the more mixed county of Mures, the PNL is attempting to make inroads by fielding Hungarian speaking candidates, while the PD-L mayor of the county capital, Targu Mures, has made it a point to work with the Hungarian minority. The relatively prosperous city of Targu Mures offers a more hopeful--but not perfect--model of interethnic cooperation and tolerance in an otherwise politically tense region. End Summary.

2. (U) Poloff and FSN visited the Transylvanian counties of Covasna, Harghita and Mures on November 18-21 to speak with local government officials, party leaders, candidates, religious leaders, academics and NGOs about the upcoming Romanian parliamentary elections. Covasna county (population 222,000) is 74 percent ethnic Hungarian and 24 percent ethnic Romanian; its capital is economically-depressed Sfantu Gheorghe, a windswept town of 61,000 ringed by communist housing blocs. Harghita county (326,000) is 85 percent ethnic Hungarian and 14 percent ethnic Romanian, the largest percentage in the country. Its well-planned but frigid capital of Miercurea Ciuc (42,000) hosts Romania's first and largest Hungarian-speaking University, and the country's best hockey team. The ethnic balance is quite different in Mures County (580,000), with a majority of ethnic Romanian residents (55 percent to 40 percent ethnic Hungarian). Similarly proportioned is its capital of Targu Mures, a clean, prosperous city of 146,000 that would not feel out of place in northern Europe.

UDMR Declares It Will Join New Government

3. (C) Leaders of the largest ethnic Hungarian party in the country, the UDMR, told us unequivocally the party would join the ruling governing coalition regardless of whether the new government was led by the PSD, PD-L or PNL. "Our opinion is that we can do much more for Hungarians by being in administrative positions," said Sf. Gheorghe Mayor Antal Arpad. Added Covasna County Council President Tamas Sandor, "the key is how many guarantees we'll have for our wish list. If I'm a lawyer, my goal is to sign a contract. I don't care when or with whom, I just want to sign the

contract."

¶4. (C) When pressed if they had a preference, our interlocutors admitted that the PD-L was their least-preferred partner. "We had a negative experience cooperating with the President Basescu's Party" said Sandor. The PD-L "hasn't kept its promises" regarding development in the Hungarian-dominated regions, Harghita County Council President Csaba Boboly told us in a separate meeting. "This is a widely held viewpoint in the UDMR." Moreover, the UDMR feels let down by the failure of the PD-L to support a bill addressing cultural autonomy for Hungarians despite Basescu's promises, Csaba explained (septel). According to UDMR officials in all three counties, the UDMR's best case scenario is for the tightest possible race among the PNL, PD-L and PSD in order to maximize its own bargaining power. While Boboly admits that the UDMR has "collaborated well with all of them," the PNL may be the preferred coalition partner, Boboly said.

#### Ethnic Hungarian Expectations - and Divisions

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¶5. (C) Currently polling between 6 and 7 percent nationally, the UDMR has been a member of the government for the prior 12 years and is perceived by ethnic Hungarians and Romanians alike as the more pragmatic--and corrupt--of the ethnic-based parties. Arpad declared there was "no doubt" the UDMR would surpass the 5 percent threshold required to enter Parliament. The new uninominal rules were not likely to impact the UDMR in areas with strong ethnic Hungarian majorities (Covasna and Harghita) or solid minorities (Mures). However, the UDMR would suffer in areas with smaller ethnic Hungarian minorities, Arpad explained. "Under the previous system, in counties where ethnic Hungarians are a small minority, we would get at least one representative to parliament because of party lists," he said. "In this system, we'll never get one from the smaller regions. Smaller parties are sidelined now."

¶6. (C) The Hungarian Civil Party (PCM), a small spin-off from the UDMR, feels especially sidelined. The PCM formed when disaffected UDMR members concluded the party was not pursuing Hungarian autonomy with sufficient zeal (septel). "The UDMR always mentions autonomy at election time. There are no actual concrete steps. Autonomy becomes a rubber bone for the dog - the voter," a member of the PCM-affiliated National Szekler Council told us in a meeting in Sft. Gheorghe city. UDMR corruption while in the Government and general inattention to local communities "provoked the creation of the Civic Party," said a CSM member: "Now, the UDMR is trying to re-create a monopoly as a single party. We sat down and proposed an electoral alliance with them. The rejected our proposal. They didn't want to cooperate with us...Their purpose is not to create pluralism among Hungarians in Romania."

¶7. (C) With no UDMR agreement in hand, the PCM debated whether to run candidates at all. Local PCM leaders in Sf. Gheorghe wanted to do so, but were overruled by the PCM National Board, which decided instead to support six independent candidates. This decision resulted from "the hysteria created by the UDMR that we're creating a schism and endangering parliamentary representation for Hungarians in Romania," said a local PCM leader. "We don't have high expectations from these elections in terms of entering Parliament or addressing autonomy. Lacking financial resources, it's difficult to run. It's even tougher to have candidates in other regions where we're a small minority." A Sf. Gheorghe PCM official chimed in, "But here in town, we're frustrated. We feel we could have won under our party banner." (Comment: under the uninominal electoral rules requiring 50% plus one vote, the independent candidates have little hope of victory. Arpad, the UDMR mayor of Sf. Gheorghe, told us matter-of-factly "none of them will enter Parliament." End Comment).

....And Angst

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18. (C) The UDMR-PCM split has demoralized the ethnic Hungarian community, we were repeatedly told. UDMR officials expected low turnout across the three counties, with estimates at 40-45 percent. "This region traditionally has a higher turnout than other areas," said Sandor. "This time we think it will be the same as the rest of the country. The Hungarian Civic Party's emergence is not giving us additional votes, of course. Their political discourse is highly negative, which leads to greater absenteeism." Nemes Elod, President of the Association of Hungarian Youth, agreed. "Since the Civic Party is not running but only backing independents, there is widespread apathy among youth because of the sense that there's no competition." In the ethnic Hungarian-dominated Covasna and Harghita counties, campaigning has been slow. Most towns in these two counties have only one candidate - the UDMR representative, with no apparent ethnic Romanian or Hungarian Civic Party competitors. In the county capitals of Sf. Gheorghe and Miercurea Ciuc, we saw virtually no evidence of the campaign, save for the occasional UDMR poster. The ethnic Hungarian-majority villages that cling to Transylvania's twisting, two-lane highways displayed more campaign posters, but the vast majority of them were UDMR.

19. (C) Do most ethnic Hungarians blame the UDMR for not bringing benefits to the county? Do they blame the Civic Party for exacerbating the split? According to Miercurea Ciuc Mayor Robert Raduly (UDMR), neither. "Villagers here have a fatalistic view. Life is tough and we have to survive. We can solve problems by ourselves. Urban residents are more exposed to the consumer economy, and yearn for higher standards." As a result, the UDMR has maintained strong levels of support in the countryside, where officials can more easily campaign door-to-door, while the Civic Party has made some inroads in the larger towns, where life is a bit less of a struggle and issues like autonomy are debated. Still, "the Civic Party is merely a 'protest vote' for Hungarians...They're not a problem for the UDMR here. The big problem for us is turnout, explained Boboly, the Harghita County Council President. "We need a high turnout with a majority, so votes can be redistributed to other districts."

The Mood Worsens: Ethnic Romanians Suspicious, Irritated and Divided

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10. (C) PD-L Deputy Petre Strachinaru, the only ethnic Romanian MP in Covasna county, told us "We're just pretending to run a campaign here. Romanians know we'll lose." He painted a bleak portrait of the ethnic Romanian situation in Covasna and Harghita counties. Most ethnic Romanians were disgruntled, fed up with the ethnic Hungarians who claimed to represent them and with ethnic Romanian national politicians who ignored their plight. "Here, the problems are much larger than the rest of the country. We have a high unemployment rate, among the highest nation wide. Investment per capita decreased in 2007. Salaries are lower here," Strachinaru explained. Advancing a view we heard from other ethnic Romanian politicians in the region, Strachinaru blamed UDMR politicians for subverting development in order to preserve the Hungarian ethnic advantage; too many job opportunities, the thinking goes, would open the gates to an ethnic Romanian flood and leave the ethnic Hungarians in the minority. "The PD-L has stated all of this publicly. We've promised to bring some funding to the county." The PD-L also stands to benefit from a recent Basescu visit to Covasna county. "He's the only head of state who came here during his term. Ethnic Hungarians love him for that. During the referendum debate [regarding Basescu's suspension], the UDMR voted for the suspension but the population here overwhelmingly was against it."

¶11. (C) When asked if UDMR participation in a governing coalition with the PD-L would improve matters, Strachinaru equivocated. Non-participation of the UDMR in the government would radicalize its supporters and enflame tensions between ethnic Romanians and ethnic Hungarians, he said. On the other hand, the UDMR had little to show for the last decade-plus it has been in the government. Encapsulating a view we heard from ethnic Romanians elsewhere, he asked rhetorically "Nothing has been done here. Why should they [the UDMR] be in the government?"

¶12. (C) Perhaps more frustrating to a cross-section of ethnic Romanians than the UDMR leadership was their own inability to unite around a single ethnic Romanian political party. Romanian Orthodox Bishop Ioan Stelejan of Covasna and Harghita counties told us political divisions had prevented ethnic Romanians from emerging as an electoral force in his two county region; ethnic Romanians knew it, and felt ignored as a result. In contrast, he continued, the ethnic Hungarian population remained disciplined and will vote for the UDMR. Even in areas where the ethnic Romanians are in the majority -- one voting district in Harghita and Covasna counties -- the ethnic Romanian parties have put up their own candidates, thereby dividing the vote. "It's possible none of them will get to Parliament," Stelejan said. PSD Deputy Mircea Dusa, the only ethnic Romanian MP from Harghita County, is running in the one ethnic Romanian majority district in Harghita county. His competition is fierce, he told us in Miercurea Ciuc before rushing back to his district. "The 40 percent of the ethnic Hungarians that make up the district will vote UDMR. And it's too late for some accord among the remaining three ethnic Romanian parties to horse-trade to ensure a Romanian victory in a ethnic Romanian-majority area." A similar phenomenon may occur in Mures county, where ethnic Romanians comprise a 55 percent majority. Dorin Florea, the PD-L Mayor of Tirgu Mures, the county capital, predicted the same outcome county-wide: the 40 percent of county that was ethnic Hungarian would vote UDMR, while the PD-L, PSD and PNL would divide up the remainder.

#### Cooler Heads in Mures County

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¶13. (C) Time and time again, local ethnic Romanian politicians in Covasna and Harghita counties complained that their ethnic Hungarian counterparts were raising the issue of Hungarian autonomy to stir up ethnic Hungarian voters. "The media here are controlled by ethnic Hungarian politicians," said Harghita County Prefect Strujan. "They transmit the messages the politicians want and the don't inform locals what the Romanian state does for them. This is very harmful." Dusa separately told us that "ordinary folks in the county don't have many conflicts with each other. The problems emerge with the politicians....of course, minority Romanians are irritated." Targu Mures Mayor Dorin Florea (PD-L) echoed these thoughts: "The UDMR leaders try to keep the population ignorant. They're not interested in infrastructure, economics, real issues." Governing in a mixed city, the mayor selected an ethnic Hungarian deputy mayor, "and now he's under pressure from the UDMR not to cooperate with me. It's outrageous that we have important projects concerning infrastructure and real estate here and we have no UDMR ministers or parliamentarians trying to implement those projects. Instead, they encourage their NGOs to block them."

¶14. (SBU) Nevertheless, Mures Deputy County Prefects Zamfira Pora (PNL) and Gyozso Baczi (UDMR) described a "voter friendly" campaign in their county that lacked the aggressive tone in the neighboring ethnic Hungarian-majority counties of Harghita and Covasna. "There have been small attacks against opponents but not nationalistic attacks," said Mures County Council President Eموke Lokodi (UDMR). "Nothing outrageous." Ethnic Hungarians in Targu Mures City "have more problems with the Hungarian candidates here than with the Romanian candidates

here. Now, we have fights between Hungarians and Hungarians and between Romanians and Romanians," Lokodi said. Interestingly, cross fertilization has begun. The ethnic Romanian parties are playing on the UDMR-PCM split to capture Hungarian voters, while the UDMR is seeking to attract ethnic Romanian voters because as ethnic Hungarian divisions have weakened the UDMR in certain districts, even that of UDMR President Marko Bela. "Imagine! There are bilingual posters on both sides!" Pora said.

¶15. (SBU) The PNL, in particular, has been at the forefront of fielding ethnic Hungarian candidates. Many of these Hungarian PNL candidates are virtual unknowns. "A danger that arises -- but is not of concern yet -- is that this will confuse some of our voting base," Pora said, referring to ethnic Romanian PNL supporters. One thing remains certain, though: the Romanian parties in Mures County are in intense competition and remain divided. The Hungarians should win here, Pora predicted, but since they comprised only 40 percent of the county, they would need Romanian assistance to govern. The need to build coalitions means that there may be more contact between Romanians and Hungarians in Mures county than in deeply divided Harghita and Covasna Counties. "Here we try to understand each other as people, not just based on our political affiliations." Pora said. "Targu Mures is a small city," said Smaranda Enache, President of the NGO Pro Europa League. "People have to find a way to cooperate, and they generally do."

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